

OPINION

A Sinking Feeling

Why is the president of the tiny Pacific island nation of Nauru so concerned about climate change?



Marcus Stephen,
the President of Nauru, addressing
the U.N. last year



Climate change is about more than just the weather. For many low-lying island nations in the Pacific, it threatens local economies, food sources, drinking water—indeed, their very survival: Rising sea levels from the melting of polar ice caps are leaving entire islands at risk for flooding. The following is an adaptation of an Op-Ed piece by Marcus Stephen, the president of Nauru, one of the nations most vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

You've probably never heard of my country, and for that, I forgive you. At just eight square miles—about a third of the size of Manhattan—and located in the southern Pacific Ocean, Nauru (*na-OO-roo*) appears as merely a pinpoint on most maps—if it is not missing entirely in a vast expanse of blue.

But make no mistake: We are a sovereign nation, with our own

language, customs, and a 3,000-year history. Nauru is worth a quick Internet search, I assure you. Not only will you discover a fascinating country that is often overlooked, you will find a cautionary tale about life in a place with hard ecological limits. (For more on Nauru, see p. 31.)

Phosphate mining—first by European companies in the early 1900s and later our own—cleared the lush tropical rainforest that once covered our island's interior, scarring the land and leaving only a thin strip of coastline for the island's 10,000 people to live on. The legacy of exploitation left us with few economic alternatives and one of the highest unemployment rates in the world, nearly 90 percent.

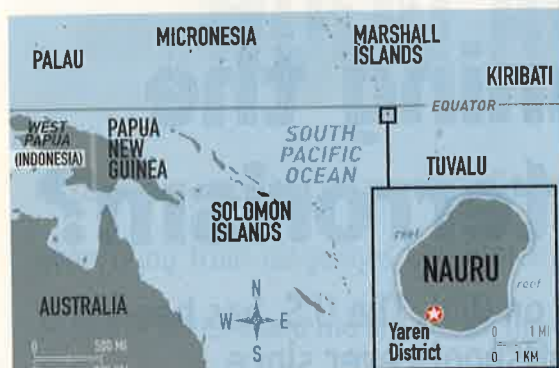
I am not looking for sympathy, but rather warning you what can happen when a country runs out of options. The world is headed down a similar path with the relentless burning of coal and oil, which is altering the planet's

climate, melting ice caps, making oceans more acidic, and edging us ever closer to a day when no one will be able to take clean water, fertile soil, or abundant food for granted.

Vanishing Nations

With sea levels expected to rise three feet or more by the end of the century, climate change threatens the very existence of many countries in the Pacific. Already, Nauru's coast, the only habitable area, is steadily eroding. In 2008 and 2009, respectively, people in nearby Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands were forced to flee their homes to escape record tides. The low-lying nations of Tuvalu, Kiribati, and the Marshall Islands (*see chart, right*) may vanish entirely within our grandchildren's lifetimes.

Similar climate stories are playing out on nearly every continent, where a steady onslaught of droughts, floods, and heat waves—which some scientists



Children in Nauru: Is evacuation in their future?



expect will become even more frequent and intense with climate change—have displaced millions of people and led to widespread food shortages.

The changes have already heightened competition over scarce resources and could foreshadow a world in which conflicts are increasingly driven by environmental catastrophes.

Global Wake-up Call

Yet the international community has not begun to prepare for the political instability that could result around the world.

In 2009, an initiative by the Pacific Small Island Developing States, of which I am chairman, prompted the United Nations General Assembly to recognize the link between climate change and security. But two years later, no concrete action has been taken.

I believe it's crucial for the international community to recognize climate change as a threat to international

peace and security. It is a danger as great as nuclear proliferation or global terrorism, and the stakes are too high to ignore until after a disaster is upon us.

Negotiations to reduce emissions should be the primary forum for reaching an international agreement. We are not asking for blue helmets—U.N. forces—to intervene; we are simply asking the international community to plan for the biggest environmental and humanitarian challenge of our time.

Nauru has begun an intensive program to repair the damage done by mining, and my administration has put environmental sustainability at the center of its policymaking. Making our island whole again will be a long and difficult process, but it is our home and we cannot leave it for another one.

I forgive you if you have never heard of Nauru—but you will not forgive yourselves if you ignore our story. •

Most Endangered

Island nations at highest risk for flooding due to climate change*

- 1 Marshall Islands (Pacific)**
- 2 Bahrain (Persian Gulf)**
- 3 Maldives (Indian Ocean)**
- 4 Kiribati (Pacific)**
- 5 Bahamas (Atlantic)**
- 6 Tuvalu (Pacific)**
- 7 Nauru (Pacific)**
- 8 Cape Verde (Atlantic)**
- 9 Seychelles (Indian Ocean)**
- 10 Trinidad & Tobago (Caribbean)**

*RANKING REFLECTS PERCENT OF POPULATION AT RISK;
SOURCE: ROBERT NICHOLLS AND SALLY BROWN,
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON, U.K.